

Suicide bombs claim 55 lives in Damascus

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Global Research, May 11, 2012

[World Socialist Web Site](#) 11 May 2012

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Yesterday's double suicide bombing in the al-Qazzaz suburb of Damascus claimed at least 55 lives and injured 370. The blasts occurred at 7:56 a.m. at a crowded intersection that is home to a military intelligence complex. The bombs, which detonated almost simultaneously, tore to pieces children on their way to school and incinerated people in their cars going to work in the Syrian capital.

The official Syrian news agency, SANA, reported that rescue workers at the scene had collected "15 bags of limbs and torn-off" body parts at the scene. It said that 105 cars had been completely destroyed in the blast.

The devastating attack is only the latest in a growing list of suicide bombings by Salafist and Wahhabi elements that includes the April 10 suicide attack outside a Damascus mosque that killed 10 people, mainly soldiers.

On Wednesday, a convoy of United Nations monitors involved in overseeing Kofi Annan's April 12 ceasefire was bombed, wounding eight members of the security forces.

The aim is to undermine the Syrian cease-fire, a deliberate policy pursued by opposition groups to encourage and legitimize military intervention by a coalition of Sunni powers, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

This in turn is designed to ensure the strategic and military support of the United States, which wants regime change in Syria without committing to a campaign on the scale of that carried out in Libya.

Yet the media response to both events follows a pattern. All references to the obvious authors of such acts are attributed to "government claims" of "terrorist groups", accompanied by denials by the opposition Syrian National Council of any responsibility and accusations that the government is most likely the real author. In contrast, breaches of the ceasefire by the regime targeting the opposition are portrayed as the slaughter of "his people" by Bashir al-Assad, accompanied by declarations that the joint UN-Arab League peace plan is failing.

On Tuesday, Annan acknowledged breaches of the ceasefire by the opposition, but focused on accusations of torture and the use of heavy weapons to bombard opposition strongholds by the government. He told a closed session of the UN Security Council by video that a failure to implement his peace plan in full meant Syria could "descend into full civil war."

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon told the Atlantic Council, "We are in a race against time to prevent full-scale civil war—the government continues to assault its people." The think

tank's past luminaries include America's ambassador to the UN Susan Rice, who announced just two days before the Damascus bombing that the US is stepping up its "non-lethal" aid to the Syrian opposition,

Earlier, Ban denounced Assad for holding a long promised and already delayed national election on Monday, insisting, "Only a comprehensive and inclusive political dialogue can lead to a genuine democratic future in Syria. ... These elections are not taking place within that framework."

What he meant was that only a political shift that sees Assad's fall and the installation of a Western-backed opposition will suffice.

Turkish Prime Minister Recip Erdogan spent Sunday visiting a Syrian refugee camp, before telling the press Monday that Assad's regime is "finished".

Defining the UN mission as a failure would be the signal for a shift towards a more overt military campaign. There are around 70 UN observers in Syria, with a target of 300 to be deployed by the end of May. But the US has repeatedly put a question mark over whether it will endorse the 90-day mission set for the observers or whether it will determine that it has failed.

"If the regime's intransigence continues, the international community is going to have to admit defeat and work to address the serious threat to peace and stability being perpetrated by the Assad regime," said White House spokesman Jay Carney.

Reuters cited two anonymous Western diplomats as saying, "There is effectively no ceasefire for UN monitors to observe" and "If the government continues not to comply we will want to come back to the council for a different kind of action."

Meanwhile, the US military is playing the leading role in military exercises in Jordan, across Syria's southern border, involving some 12,000 troops, including American special operations units as well as Saudi and Qatari forces.

Figures close to the Obama administration are suggesting that the stepped-up terror bombings provide a justification for intervention. "If countries in the region and beyond start seeing this as the disintegration of order within which any number of groups can then act, that becomes an even greater danger than simply an internal civil war spilling over borders, which is bad enough," Anne-Marie Slaughter, the former State Department planning director and a leading advocate of "humanitarian" intervention told National Public Radio. NPR quoted her as saying that: "the presence of jihadist groups in Syria shouldn't dissuade the US and its allies from intervening. Rather, she says, it should wake them up to the dangers that a prolonged conflict in Syria could create."

However, the US has many factors to consider regarding how openly it becomes involved in a military campaign, including the deep unpopularity of such a move at home during an election year and the opposition it faces from Russia and China.

Some in Washington are arguing that an attrition strategy of supporting the opposition and financial sanctions is enough to cripple Syria and weaken Iran as a regional power. But there is a significant lobby for a proxy war waged by an alliance of Sunni states.

A lot depends upon how such a war can be instigated and effectively led, given that the UN route is blocked by Russia's and China's veto power, and a NATO intervention could prove to be too explosive in the aftermath of Libya. A factor in such calculations is the unreliability and weakness of the opposition led by the SNC and various rivals for Washington's favours.

The SNC is a coalition dominated by Islamist groups that has little cohesion or popular support. The dominant force is the Muslim Brotherhood, which, as in Egypt and Libya, is offering its services as a reliable ally for Washington—part of a new sectarian “Sunni axis” to be pitched against Assad's Alawite regime and Shi'ite Iran.

Writing in the *New York Times* May 6, Neil MacFarquhar describes an SNC dominated by the Brotherhood and two other Islamist organizations, the National Action Group and the Syria National Movement, “vying for influence.”

Kamal Lebwany, a “liberal” who quit the SNC complains, “The Muslim Brotherhood monopolizes everything—the money, the weapons, the SNC. The SNC has a liberal peel covering a totalitarian, nondemocratic core.”

Former Muslim Brotherhood head Ali Sadreddin al-Bayanouni estimates that the Brotherhood sent between \$1 million to \$2 million monthly into Syria “for humanitarian needs”. A local imam explains, “They want me to rebuild the Muslim Brotherhood's group through a charity network by helping poor families, jailed activists and by paying for medical aid. If we could present good services and policies to all Syrians, we will be elected.”

Daniel Brode of the Israel-based Max Security Solutions, explains in *Middle East Online*, “The recent wave of suicide bombings in Syria, along with Lebanon's seizure of a weapons-laden cargo ship intended for Syrian rebels, underscores the infiltration of not only Sunni jihadist ideology into Syria, but also weapons, tactics, and fighters from throughout the Middle East.”

He cites the backing for the insurgency by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Libya and the emergence of such groups as the al-Nusra Front, which has claimed responsibility for several suicide bombings—though this has gone largely unreported in the Western media.

At the moment, everything possible is being done to strengthen the SNC and FSA militarily and politically. In particular, the SNC has been instructed to take more direct control of the uprising by paying known leaders of the FSA inside Syria, using pledges of \$100 million from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates and \$33 million from the US.

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